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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this Digest is to provide information for family child care providers regarding children's early literacy development. A definition and the characteristics of family child care are discussed in the first part of this Digest. The second half focuses on research-based strategies and recommendations that help support early literacy development for children enrolled in family child care settings: children acquire the forms and function of literacy through interacting with more capable peers and adults; children learn best from meaningful and functional activities; children learn to be literate in a literacy-rich environment, where diverse, real-life materials and activities meet children's different needs and interests; and providers should use public facilities and collaborate with local higher education institutes. (Contains 20 references.) (RS)

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Supporting Early Literacy Development in Family Child Care Settings

By Mei-Yu Lu

The purpose of this Digest is to provide information for family child care providers regarding children's early literacy development. A definition and the characteristics of family child care are discussed in the first part of this Digest, while the second half focuses on research-based strategies and recommendations that help support early literacy development for children enrolled in family child care settings.

With growing numbers of mothers entering the work force, the need for out-of-home child care has increased dramatically in the last two decades (O'Neill & O'Connell, 2001). A recent survey by Capizzano, Adams, & Sonenstein (2000) reveals that approximately 3/4 of American children under age 5 with employed mothers are cared for by someone other than their parents during the day; and among these children, 1/5 were enrolled in family child care. Although family child care is one of the most commonly used out-of-home child care arrangements, little research is available regarding children's early literacy learning and development in such settings (Cress, 2000). As the acquisition of written language skills is critical to children's later academic success, it is important to explore how family child care providers can develop sound literacy programs as well as create literacy-rich environments that support children's early literacy development.

Definition and Characteristics of Family Child Care

Family child care, also called "day care home," is a type of out-of-home child care in which one or more people care for a group of unrelated children (usually fewer than 12) on a regular basis at the care provider's own home (Morgan, Azer, & LeMoine, 2001; NCJW Center for the Child, 2003). A day care home shares many features with a child care center, but also possesses several distinctive characteristics that make it an appealing alternative to some families. These include:

(1) Intimacy: In a day care home, there is only a single or fewer caregivers than is typical of a center-based child care facility. When children stay in a home for several years, they usually develop close relationships with their caregiver (Modigliani, 1994). Also, because of the small number (usually fewer than 12) of children in a family child care setting, these children, their families, and child care providers tend to know each other personally. These families often form a relationship similar to that in an extended family (Modigliani, 1994).

(2) Flexibility: Because of the intimate relationship between the family child care provider and the children and their families, a day care home is also more likely to cater to the special needs of individual children (Modigliani, 1994; NCJW Center for the Child, 2003), as well as to offer flexible hours for parents who do not have fixed working schedules (Eaton, 1997; NCJW Center for the Child, 2003). In addition, family child care providers typically care for children at a variety of age and developmental levels (Morgan, Azer, & LeMoine, 2001; Trawick-Smith & Lambert, 1995). It is therefore possible for all siblings from a single family to be enrolled in the same home (Eaton, 1997; Modigliani, 1994; Morgan, Azer, & LeMoine, 2001; NCJW Center for the Child, 2003).

(3) Familiarity and proximity: Family child care offers children a home-like and familiar environment, for the children are being cared for in the child care provider's own home (Modigliani, 1994; NCJW Center for the Child, 2003). In most cases, the day care home will be close to the parents' home and/or place of work (NCJW Center for the Child, 2003).

Basic Principles of Early Literacy Learning and Development: Recommendations for Family Child Care Providers

Because of its unique characteristics, an early literacy program in a day care home may appear strikingly different than a center-based child care facility. However, the same fundamental principles should be observed in both settings. The following recommendations for developing a quality early literacy program are made based on the principles of social-constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Moll, 1990) and scholarship from the field of early literacy (Clay, 1991; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000; Wells, 1986; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Taylor, 1993), with special attention paid to the distinctive features of the day care home.

1. Children acquire the forms and function of literacy through interacting with more capable peers and adults.
The multiple age and developmental levels of children enrolled in a day care home pose a challenge as well as provide an opportunity for the child care provider to design activities to promote the literacy learning and development of both younger and older children. Trawick-Smith and Lambert (1995) suggest that both old and young children benefit from shared book reading experience. The shared book experience can take two forms: older children reading aloud to the younger ones, or the child care providers reading a book to a group of older and younger children. The older children are able to practice their reading skills and acquire new knowledge, while the younger children have opportunities to learn from the adults and older children the conventions of reading, such as book handling and the directionality of written text. Crawford and Hade (2000) also suggest that wordless picture books can be valuable reading materials, for younger and older children are both able to respond as well as interpret such books in their own ways.

2. Children learn best from meaningful and functional activities.
One strength of a day care home lies in the caregiver's ability to provide activities that children normally see and/or do around their house, which are less common in a typical child care center (Trawick-Smith & Lambert, 1995). Simple cooking activities such as making salad or baking cookies, involve reading, writing, math, and eye-hand coordination skills, are enjoyed by younger and older children alike. In addition, field

trips such as visiting zoos, parks, and public libraries also provide children of different ages with opportunities to be engaged in literacy activities that meet their interests and needs. While planning for trips, the children and child care provider can read books about the place they will be visiting (e.g., the zoo). While on the road, the child care provider and/or volunteering parents can point out interesting signs, objects, and sights for children to watch and discuss. If the field trip involves visiting a public services facility, such as a post office, then the children can write/draw thank-you cards for the person(s) providing assistance. Through such functional and meaningful activities, children understand that the purpose of literacy is to communicate with others and achieve various goals in their life (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

3. Children learn to be literate in a literacy-rich environment, where diverse, real-life materials and activities meet children's different needs and interests. Children learn to be literate by observing activities in their environment, interacting with the people around them, and using literacy tools for functional and meaningful activities (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). Because of the different ages and developmental levels of the children in a day care home, the literacy materials should meet diverse needs of children. Literacy tools, such as writing materials of various kinds (crayons, pencils, pens, markers, paper of different colors, sizes, and textures) as well as toys, tapes, CD-ROMs, literacy props (phone books, play money, and restaurant menus) and books should be carefully selected to reflect individual children's learning and developmental needs. Even very young children enjoy holding crayons and making marks on writing surfaces. Materials for toddlers and young preschoolers (e.g., chubby crayons and paper) should be available to these children and used with adult supervision. Materials for the older children, such as scissors and staplers, need to be carefully stored and used in designated area(s).

4. Providers should use public facilities and collaborate with local higher education institutes.
Although family child care providers share their home with the children they care for, they are not limited by the resources of their own household. Public resources and facilities, such as the public library, also provide opportunities for children to develop their literacy skills (Bates & Bates, 1999). Children can attend storytelling sessions, check out books, and attend various literacy events at the libraries. In addition, child care providers in most areas can acquire inexpensive literacy materials from such sources as library book fairs, yard and garage sales, bookstores' discount sections, used or second-hand bookstores, recycling centers, and charity sales [e.g., Salvation Army and Goodwill] (Stroup, 2001).

The collaboration between day care homes and local higher education institutions provide additional opportunities for children to interact with literate adults and develop reading and writing skills. For example, Lamme and Russo (2002) described *Project Booktalk*, in which college students visit child care homes weekly over a semester and read books to children enrolled in day care homes. This project was well received by all parties involved, especially the children, who benefited from the opportunity to bond with adults of varying literacy experiences and cultures.

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